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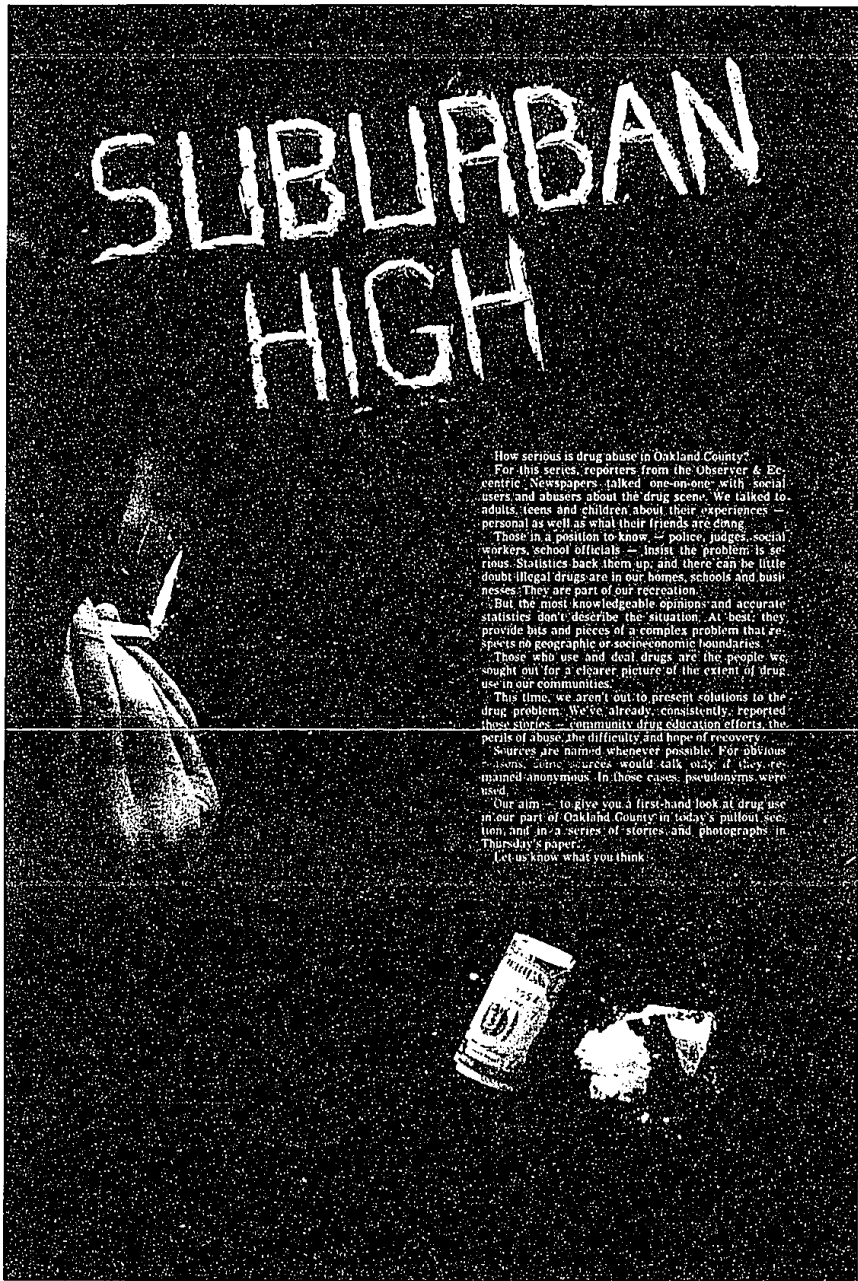


Photo illustration by DAN DEAN

SUBURBAN HIGH

How serious is drug abuse in Oakland County? For this series, reporters from the Observer & Eccentric newspapers talked one-on-one with social workers and educators about the drug scene. We talked to adults, teens and children about their experiences — personal as well as what their friends are doing.

Those in a position to know — police, judges, social workers, school officials — insist the problem is serious. Statistics back them up; and there can be little doubt illegal drugs are in our homes, schools and businesses. They are part of our recreation.

But the most knowledgeable opinions and accurate statistics don't describe the situation. At best, they provide bits and pieces of a complex problem that respects no geographic or socioeconomic boundaries.

Those who use and deal drugs are the people we sought out for a clearer picture of the extent of drug use in our communities.

This time, we aren't out to present solutions to the drug problem. We've already consistently reported those stories — community drug education efforts, the perils of abuse, the difficulty and hope of recovery.

Our aim — to give you a first-hand look at drug use in our part of Oakland County in today's platoon section, and in a series of stories and photographs in this Thursday's paper.

Let us know what you think.



County houses users, dealers

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Asked to describe the drug problem in Oakland County, a special agent for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency chuckled.

"We've got all the drugs we need," he said. "All you gotta do is look around. Marijuana, cocaine, crack, heroin . . . Oakland's got it. But nobody can say how deep the problem goes."

Indeed, various indicators clearly point to a wide range of drugs being available in most communities to adults and youngsters.

Take, for example, these incidents:

• A Troy woman, once reportedly named "Mother of the Year" for her work in the schools, was convicted in April of possessing cocaine with intent to deliver.

• In Southfield, three men were arrested in March after the Drug Enforcement Agency raided a basement greenhouse where agents said they found 388 marijuana plants. The men — including a teacher at West Bloomfield High School — face possible grand jury indictment.

• In Rochester Hills last year, the president of the Adams High School student council was arrested for selling LSD to finance a trip to Florida.

• In Farmington, a 16-year-old girl overdosed after taking what police said was a "synthetic drug," possibly LSD, in a high school parking lot. Her parents initially refused to allow police to interview her without first granting immunity from prosecution.

These examples aren't particularly sensational. They pale when compared with multiple drug-related murders in Wayne County or bizarre cases of addicted parents neglecting their children — or subjecting them to sexual abuse.

But they indicate a pervasive problem with roots in virtually all of our communities no matter how rich or poor.

Grand jury indictments

Just ask Richard Thompson, Oakland County prosecutor, and Ruth Evens, coordinator of substance abuse for the health division of the county's department of institutional and human services.

Thompson oversees two ongoing grand juries authorized specifically to investigate drug networks and unsolved murders in Oakland County.

In less than nine months, the grand juries have returned 38 indictments for drug charges, perjury and four murders.

As an experienced prosecutor, including 16 years as chief assistant to former prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson, Thompson is not easily shocked.

Since getting involved with the grand juries, however, and getting a "clearer" look at Oakland's drug scene, even the jaded prosecutor admits being surprised at the pervasiveness and depth.

"Oakland may seem drug-free to some people," Thompson said at a recent press conference. "But drugs are a major problem in this county."

Oakland doesn't have "tail-tale crack houses," Thompson said. But it has major dealers who don't use drugs, yet make millions selling them.

The prosecutor likened their multi-million dollar operations to a sophisticated corporation. "You don't see these dealers with drugs any more than you'd see Lee Iacocca

Please turn to page 4 of the Special Report

INSIDE

"WAKE AND BAKE" Today's terminology for getting high before school. Teenagers who use drugs are smoking marijuana on the way to school, buying other drugs when they get there and using them after class. Page 2.

LOOK BUT DON'T TOUCH: Elementary and middle school students see others using drugs but tend not to use them themselves. Overall, few believe the drug problem is as big as it's made out to be. Page 2.

COKE COURIER: She's in it for the money and the game she plays with the cops. Her territory: the homes of Oakland County's upper middle class. Page 3.

HIT PARADE: Cocaine, marijuana, LSD and crack are bought right here; users don't have to drive to Detroit to make buys. Here's a popularity ranking of how they're sold and their price. Page 2.

EMPTY HANDED: Drugs are available "everywhere," say narcotics officers, but things have changed. Where dealers once sold openly, today they're more discreet. Adults without the right connections will come up empty handed. Page 3.

WRONG IMPRESSION: An adult who has smoked marijuana for the past 20 years says society has stereotyped him and people like him. Page 3.

RAID: A photo essay of Oakland County's Narcotics Enforcement Team during a raid. Page 4.

COVERAGE CONTINUES in Thursday's Observer & Eccentric newspapers:

QUEEN BEE: A profile of the woman who heads Oakland County's Narcotics Enforcement Team — the squad that breaks down doors for a living. Suburban Life.

SPORTS: That some members of area high school sports teams use drugs is, unfortunately, not a surprise. That they sometimes get high before games, occasionally using LSD, is the story we uncovered. Sports.

Cocaine — Oakland's drug of choice

By Joanne Mallazewski
staff writer

Cocaine is Oakland County's ruling drug. The popular drug represents about half of the illegal drugs tested from Oakland County in the Michigan State Police Forensic Laboratory in Sterling Heights.

"The utilization of crack and powder is widespread. We may see a lot of crack in Pontiac. But that doesn't eliminate other areas. It's almost an interlacing," said lab chemist Ralph Sochocki.

Lab chemists test drugs confiscated from users and sellers prior to criminal prosecution.

"Anything someone will be tried on in criminal court, we have to prove that it is indeed a controlled substance," chemist John Siefert said.

After the predominant cocaine — both the powder and the smokable rock form, crack — lab chemists see marijuana, and every so often, "a little bit of heroin," coming from Oakland County, Siefert said.

LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), common-

ly known as acid, pops up in Oakland County every now and then.

"We see that after a Grateful Dead concert. The former hippies come out trying to continue their youth," chemist Dennis Lippert said.

THE NEW drug on the scene, ice, a crystalline form of an old drug, methamphetamine, is more spoken about than seen in Oakland County. "We're not seeing it yet. But it appears it could be coming this way."

"We'll most likely see a flood of it if we start winning the cocaine war," Siefert said. Oakland County drugs tested in the lab are only those that police agencies are enforcing.

"Oakland County mirrors the entire drug situation, which means there is an increase from Oakland County," Siefert said. "We are seeing a virtual flood of cocaine."

"In Pontiac you'll see crack. In Troy, you'll probably see powder (cocaine). Real hard core drug use has been an inner city thing. Recreational drug use is a suburban thing."

Lippert boils that down to dollars. "He (the suburbanite) can afford a nose job if he ruins his nose with cocaine."

Though the chemists don't keep hard and fast statistics on which drugs show up in which specific communities, they can make generalities. Heroin, for example, usually comes from Pontiac or Royal Oak Township, not the Bloomfields or Farmingtons.

"The amount of heroin you see lessens as you move away from Eight Mile," Siefert said. "Tooting high-grade heroin is popular lately in Troy. I think this drug is going to be coming back. But it has to be potent," Sochocki said.

HEROIN is generally associated with intravenous injections. But tooting and smoking would be more common in the suburbs.

"Consider that 75 percent of intravenous drug users have the HIV positive virus (AIDS). With a little bit of thinking, people are saying this (tooting, smoking) is another way of experiencing this," Sochocki said.

Marijuana, the drug generally considered as harmful as a bottle of beer, is on the upswing in Oakland County. Marijuana today can be difficult to obtain. That could be a reason why many people are growing it at home, the chemists said.

Despite the popularity of harder drugs, marijuana continues to hold its position in the "drugs of choice" menu.

"There are different confidence levels. Some have stayed with marijuana because they are comfortable with it. For some it's a springboard to other drugs," Sochocki said.

The potency of drugs is stronger than ever. Cutting cocaine with mannitol or a similar substance is rare, the chemists said.

"Most of the cocaine we see is essentially pure now. Crack is, too. It has gotten cheaper. It's plentiful on the streets. They don't have to cut it now," Siefert said.

Marijuana is more expensive and more potent today. The main ingredient, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), produces the typical effects on a user's mood and perceptions.

WHILE POWDER cocaine, crack cocaine and marijuana are relatively pure and potent today, heroin's purity rides a roller coaster.

"It's up and down. Sometimes it's high, sometimes it's low," Siefert said. The chemists don't "quantitate" or analyze the substances in LSD.